
*The Poor’s Struggle for Political Incorporation* is a landmark text for those studying social movements in Latin America. It revisits and updates Collier and Collier’s (1991) classic study of the incorporation of labour movements by the state and parties in the mid 20th century, a process that generated new state-labour relations in Latin America: control and legitimation, predominantly via corporatism, rather than repression. Based on comprehensive research into the Argentine *piqueteros* movements (named after the tactic of unemployed movements who “picket” major roads), Rossi argues that early 21st century Latin America witnessed a second wave of incorporation following the disincorporation of labour movements under neoliberal regimes. Of key interest to geographers is Rossi’s argument that this second wave was primarily territorially based, rather than a labour based process.

*The Poor’s Struggle for Political Incorporation* is an outstanding book – meticulously researched, convincingly argued, and excellently written – for which I have little other than praise. Rather than provide a list of its many virtues, I briefly summarise what I take away as its two core contributions, specifically to scholarship on social movements and Latin American politics, and then return to the centrality of territory to the new “social question” that Rossi identifies in relation to contemporary Latin American social movements.

First, published in the prestigious “Cambridge Studies in Contentious Politics” book series,¹ it makes a clear contribution to social movement studies. The author develops two novel concepts: *repertoire of strategies* and *stock of legacies*. The former extends Charles Tilly’s (1978) seminal “repertoire of contention” concept by including semi-public and private events that are not overtly contentious actions (e.g. negotiation, internal reflection) thus taking into account seemingly latent periods in which social movements interact with the state and other actors. In turn, *stock of legacies* directs attention to the historically “sedimented” context (previous experiences and understandings of struggle) that informs (both constrains and makes possible) strategic action by social movements. Together, this provides an excellent framework for scholars interested in the historically and geographically

situated strategies of social movements, abstracting beyond the more visible or public moments of contention.

Second, the book situates itself in the tradition of Latin American studies and, more recently, the literature on Argentine piqueteros. By updating Collier and Collier’s (1991) thesis to the context of Latin America’s left turn Rossi makes an important contribution to ongoing regional debates (e.g. Falleti and Parrado 2018; Levitsky and Roberts 2011). Although heavily based on the Argentine experience, the book contains a short comparative chapter that discusses Bolivia and Brazil, and more recently the author has co-edited a collection that puts the second incorporation into a regional comparative perspective (Silva and Rossi 2018). In turn, the book provides a much needed update to key texts on the Argentine piquetero movement (notably Merklen 2005; Svampa and Pereyra 2003) by extending the historical perspective to the crucial Kirchner years (2003-2015). It also provides what is, to date, the only comprehensive analysis of the piquetero movement in English and will thus be of much benefit to an international (Anglophone) audience. There is much nuance and no shortage of points for debate across the book’s main arguments but I want to focus here on the centrality of territory as a concept that underlies these contributions and leaves much potential for further discussion.

Central to Rossi’s distinction between the first and second waves of incorporation is the shift from “unionization and corporatist state arrangements” to a “territorialized logic that went hand in hand with an overall territorialization of Argentine politics” (p.13). Although the book contains little theoretical detail on the author’s understanding of territorialisation (pp.13-14), Rossi (2018) has recently elaborated on this in more depth and highlights three conceptual building blocks: Tarrow’s (1977) work on the decentralisation of national politics; Davis’ (1999) seminal text on “distance” from the state as being the central for mobilising Latin American social movements; and Sack’s (1986) definition of human territoriality. Without stating it as such, Rossi (e.g. p.221) implies that he understands territorialisation as a confluence of top-down re-scaling of governance (via national decentralisation and World Bank-led territorial development) and bottom-up strategies for the survival and organisation of popular sectors, particularly that of basismo (a legacy of Peronist-Christian grassroots organising). In Argentina, these processes came to the fore in the 1990s, in the wake of rapid deindustrialisation and in the context of deepening neoliberal reforms, when Peronism (the ruling political force during the 1990s) underwent a radical transformation based on a shift
from trade union organising to a territorialised-clientelist logic (Levitsky 2003). This in turn created new political opportunities for unemployed workers’ movements to organise at a provincial and sub-provincial scale that, building on their previous stock of legacies, set in motion the mobilisation of the *piquetero* movement that would go on to define Argentina’s new “social question” (mass unemployment and the disincorporation of poor peoples from the state).

Rossi’s historically and geographically situated analysis of the territorialisation of politics in Argentina is an excellent example for those interested in exploring similar phenomena taking place elsewhere, including the seeming territorialisation of politics in Europe and North America since 2011. His relational approach to territory (containing both bottom-up and top-down strategies) is helpful and avoids reductionist readings of territory present in some Anglophone literature (see Halvorsen 2018a). It also adds to and raises further questions for vibrant Latin American debates on territory, and thus it would have been interesting for him to develop greater dialogue with the huge volume of territorial work coming out of Latin America in recent years (Halvorsen 2018a), most notably by Brazilian geographers, a literature marginalised in this and Silva and Rossi’s (2018) edited collection. Doing so would have provoked a deeper engagement with the concept of territorialisation (and territory) and may have raised questions over the extent which Rossi’s definition – linked to post-corporatist re-incorporation – is too constrained to encompass the richness of ideas and practices of contemporary Latin American social movements that mobilised territory during the period of the second incorporation.

Although the book is focused on a one social movement in Argentina, Rossi is clear that he sees this as part of a regional trend that exceeds the *piqueteros* alone. A fuller discussion of territorial grassroots politics during the period would include a diverse array of cases such as: contested urbanisation (particularly around shanty towns but also the use of public space) (Souza 2015a, 2015b); access and rights to land (Fernandes and Pereira 2016); indigenous and afro-descendent struggles for territory (as way of life) (Escobar 2008; Porto-Gonçalves 2012); demands for the deepening of democracy (e.g. local participatory governance) (Abers 2000); and socio-ecological movements (Svampa 2017). Although Rossi does acknowledge the importance of many of these, particularly in other regional contexts (Chapter 8; Rossi 2018; Silva and Rossi 2018) they are analysed from the logic of (re)incorporation that focuses centrally on the institutions and formalised mechanisms for
relating between popular movements and the state. This has the limitation of marginalising the deeply ontological politics of territorialisation that is highlighted in much of the literature (Blaser 2014; Escobar 2016) while at times side-lining logics such as ethnicity and gender that intersect with territory in ways that problematize a linear narrative of state (re)incorporation (Radcliffe 2014).

Rossi’s analysis makes clear that the (re)incorporation of popular sectors was a partial process from which many were excluded. If the key guiding logic to this second wave was the territorialisation of politics, then this provides us with a helpful framework for grappling with how and why this limitation came about, a core concern for scholars analysing the successes and limitations of Latin America’s left turn. For example, as Rossi argues, indigenous and peasant movements have long been peripheral in Argentina. Yet these movements are increasingly at the forefront of territorialised grassroots politics due to their frontline role in resisting and negotiating the neo-extractivist politics that sustained the Kirchner government during the second wave of incorporation (Svampa 2017). Their lack of presence in the text is understandable, given the empirical focus, yet their inclusion may have troubled some of the narrative around territorial incorporation forcing a more open or decolonial engagement with territorialisation. Moreover, the intimate relation between gender and territorialisation, long recognised through the gendered nature of neighbourhood organising (Kaufman and Alfonso 1997) and more recently analysed through the notion of cuerpo-territorio (Cabnal 2010; Zaragocin 2018), may have troubled some of the narrative including understandings of how, and where, the state is produced. Here, recent geographical work on the everyday production of the state (Jeffrey 2013; McConnell 2016; Painter 2006), would provoke an interesting dialogue with Rossi’s work by thinking through the performative and multi-scalar nature of state-society relations. Finally, although some of the book’s detail challenges this, there is an implicit assumption that syndicalist and territorial politics are opposed when there are arguments both for the (ongoing) territorialisation of unions (see Lazar 2017) and the unionisation of territory (in urban neighbourhoods) (Varela 2015) in Argentina, highlighting the inseparability of space and society (Fernandes 2008; Santos 1994), an argument that would further enrich the book’s territorial narrative.

In sum, Rossi’s analysis is an outstanding overview of why and how popular movements have evolved in Argentina since the turn of the century and should become a classic text for scholars of contemporary Latin American social movements. By highlighting
the centrality of territorialisation to contemporary regional politics Rossi both extends and makes available to an Anglophone audience rich Latin American spatial debates and in so doing leaves a number of questions for geographers to take forward, some of which have already received attention in regional geographical literatures. From my positionality, I hope the book provides a productive means of spurring on further dialogues between Latin American and Anglophone knowledges in which the starting point is the excellent work of scholars such as Rossi working in the region (Halvorsen 2018a, 2018b).

References


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